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# Models for Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) Training: The 'Real,' the 'Necessary,' and the 'Ideal'

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# Models for Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) Training: The "Real," the "Necessary," and the "Ideal"

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Educators in higher education can affect the state of college-level teaching expertise through the training graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) receive. Making sure that both training and supervision are provided for GTAs at both the M.A. and Ph.D. levels may be the best way to promote quality GTA teaching and, consequently, quality teaching by the professoriate of the future.

In fact, GTA training has become a topic of increasing interest. Literature has been published describing how various departments and/or institutions approach training; research has been conducted critiquing, comparing, and/or contrasting training methods; and conferences have been held for professionals involved with GTA training to share ideas and experiences. (For a review of literature across disciplines, see Gray & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1989; Feezel & Venkatagiri, 1990; Nyquist, Abbott, & Wulff, 1989; Van Note Chism & Warner, 1987; Worthen, 1988; for a review of literature specific to speech communication, see Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990.)

Our own work has involved a four-phase national survey inside and outside of speech communication. We surveyed 274 graduate deans, 69 speech communication chairs/heads and 270 chairs/heads from a random sample of noncommunication departments, 207 GTAs from a range of disciplines who had taught for at least one term, and 322 incoming GTAs who had

not yet begun that task. These four data sets form the basis for the analyses presented herein.

The purpose of this paper is to assemble what our research says about GTA training in general and specifically in departments of speech communication. Our hope is that, by compiling the four data sets into a comprehensive description of what is presently happening and what is needed in the area of GTA training, we will provide the empirical evidence campus and departmental administrators need to argue for increased activity at their own institutions. In particular, we will use data from the four samples to develop three models of GTA training: 1) the current state-of-the-art (the "real" model), 2) essential components of training that must be provided in some form (the "necessary" model), and 3) what, given the resources and energy required to achieve maximal success, might be undertaken in the not-too-distant future (the "ideal" model).

## THE "REAL" MODEL

When asked to evaluate GTA training and teaching at their institutions, graduate deans were generally neutral in their assessments. They rated their campus-wide programs at the midpoint of a 9-point satisfaction scale (1 = not at all satisfied; 9 = completely satisfied), indicated dissatisfaction with the amount of GTA training in departments on their campuses, and rated their institutions as "about the same" as others in preparing GTAs to teach. Only 7% of the deans indicated that their schools provided follow-up training and/or supervision. Thus, the "real" model was unenthusiastically endorsed by the people near the top of the educational hierarchy.

Department chairs heads both inside and outside of speech communication were somewhat more enthusiastic. When asked to evaluate their departments' training programs, the mean evaluations for chairs'/heads' satisfaction

and for their perceptions of faculty satisfaction and GTA satisfaction were all above 6 on the 9-point satisfaction scale. When asked to rate their departments' preparation of GTAs for teaching compared with other departments in their fields and in other departments at their institutions, department chairs/heads tended to feel that training and supervision in their departments was equal to or worse than training elsewhere. Fewer than 6% felt that their preparation was even slightly better. Thus, the department chairs/heads in our sample perceived the "real" model to be just adequate.

Across disciplines, this "real" model touches about half of the GTAs who teach and then only for about one week (five class days). Fifty-three percent of the returning GTAs in our combined speech communication and noncommunication sample indicated having received some form of training. Over 3/4 of the GTAs who had been trained indicated having taken a training program that lasted for one week or less, generally before the first day of regular classes. These percentages were corroborated by the sample of GTAs who had not yet been trained. Of that group, just over half indicated that they would receive some training, with 90% indicating that the training session would last five days or less.

The rate of training appeared to be higher in departments of speech communication than across disciplines. Nearly 80% of the speech communication department chairs/heads who participated in the survey indicated that their departments train GTAs prior to their entering the classroom. The shortest training program involved a one-hour orientation session held the day before the first day of classes; the longest involved two terms of training and one term of co-teaching before GTAs were allowed into their own classrooms. The model of choice (51%) was a one-week or shorter session prior to the start of school, accompanied by either an ongoing course or meetings during the first term of teaching.

One important distinction to be made pertains to the source of GTA training. Some institutions provide campus-

wide training through centralized sites. Others rely on department-based GTA training. Still others provide a combination of the two. As would be expected, there are many differences between a training program that attempts to reach across disciplines and one that focuses on a specific course or two within a given department.

## *Campus-Wide Models*

About one-fourth (28%) of the schools in the graduate deans sample offered some form of campus-side training, with the modal type of training being a one-day session prior to the beginning of the fall term. Graduate deans (36%) and other university officials (47%) accounted for the majority of individuals involved in training at these sites.

Centralized training centers focus on skill and issues relevant to a majority of GTAs on campus. Leading discussions, lecturing, evaluating students, and soliciting feedback are skills that may be incorporated into classroom across virtually all academic disciplines. Consequently, these topics appeared with greatest frequency in descriptions of campus-wide programs analyzed. Likewise, topics that help to position GTAs in their roles at the institution tend to be covered in this type of format: GTA duties, GTA rights/needs, resources available for GTAs, etc. According to our data, skills that do not generalize as well across disciplines (e.g., leading lab sections, critiquing speeches) tend not to receive as much attention in these programs.

Twenty-one campus-wide training programs sent materials to us for content analysis. (For a more detailed description of these programs, see Bort & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1989). It should be noted that campus-wide training programs frequently must trade depth for breadth. For example, school 13 in our sample covered 25 topics in a one-day workshop. In fact, the majority of campus-wide programs in our sample

(53%) presented upwards of 20 topics in a one-day or shorter session.

The description of campus-wide programs provided by the content analysis was further supported by the perceptions provided by graduate school deans. Campus-wide training programs deal with the following topics (in descending order): exam writing, building rapport, creating interest in course content, classroom management, education psychology, grading, course policies and procedures, record-keeping, lesson plan development, critiquing, student-teacher conflicts, soliciting feedback, time management, campus teaching resources, teaching resources, teaching strategies, and writing a syllabus.

According to the dean's data, campus-wide programs tend not to have the funding or staffing to offer classroom supervision. Although some programs may provide occasional classroom visitations and feedback session, ongoing supervision of several hundred GTAs would be out of the range of possibility for most programs. According to the department chairs/heads in our sample, fewer than 2% of either the speech communication or noncommunication departments received supervision of GTAs from someone outside of the department.

## *Department-Based Models*

Department-based training models may be broad-based, specific to one course, or a combination of both. Some training programs deal with the philosophical issues associated with teaching: Who is to blame when a student fails? Others focus on the details of teaching a specific course: Which critique sheet should the GTAs use for each speech? Still others attempt to weave some of the imponderables of teaching philosophy into the day-to-day tips for survival.

We found only slight differences between communication and noncommunication departments in the topics covered and strategies used for covering those topics in GTA training pro-

grams, at least from the perceptions of the department chairs/heads. Topics covered with greatest frequency were grading/critiquing assignments, course policies/procedures, writing/grading exams, classroom management, building classroom rapport, and handling conflicts. Both groups of chairs/heads indicated that some time was spent in practice grading, microteaching, group team-building, and other experiential activities. Most training time involved faculty/supervisor critiques of GTA work.

These perceptions were at least partially corroborated by the GTAs themselves, with the majority indicating that their training had covered the following topics: grading, course policies/procedures, classroom management, handling student-teacher conflicts, and a range of teaching strategies. Surprisingly, speech communication GTAs did not report receiving more instruction in communication-based teaching activities (e.g., classroom management, building rapport, critiquing, coaching, handling conflicts) than did GTAs in non-communication disciplines.

With regard to supervision, ongoing guidance tended to be a component of department-based training. According to department chairs/heads in speech communication, most supervision (88.2%) was a responsibility of a specific faculty member. Most of that supervision took the form of staff meetings and inclass observations, with speech communication departments tending to rely more heavily on someone with the title "introductory course director."

Thus, the "real" model of GTA training tends to deal with many topics of importance but quickly. The typical campus-wide program deals with 20 or more topics in a day or less and provides virtually no follow-up critique or supervision. The typical department-based program deals with 10-12 topics in a week or less, leaving potentially more time to devote to a specific issue or to practice a specific skill. The "audience" for the departmental programs is likely to be smaller, allowing for more personalized attention from the

person or people in charge of instruction and supervision. Furthermore, department faculty or introductory course directors tend to take an active role in supervision, at least to the extent that they hold regular staff meetings.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of GTAs in speech communication departments and elsewhere receive one week or less of training before generating an average of 22% of the student credit hours in their departments. Sixty-six percent of these GTAs teach their own self-contained, autonomous sections for which they do all the instruction and evaluation. Chairs/heads indicated that fewer than 4% of their GTAs were graders, recordkeepers or other "helpers" in faculty-taught sections. Thus, the overall impact of GTA teaching is staggering, an impact which further underscores the need for effective and thorough GTA training!

When asked to describe the problems that interfere with their ability to provide GTA training, chairs/heads across all departments tended to agree that there is not enough financial support. Spending money to train people who may only teach in the department for a year seems like a poor use of funds to many. Another problem departments face is lack of faculty interest in GTA training. Again, attitude may play a role here. For professors who learned to teach "the hard way," there is no apparent reason to change the system. This reasoning may be based on attitudes found in many organizations: the notion of "trial by fire" or "initiation:" into the group. Of course, this reasoning also is embedded in a lack of appreciation for the field of education as a whole. Somehow we feel that it is necessary to train people to be accountants, firefighters, salesclerks, and tour guides but it is not necessary to train college teachers.

A final problem expressed by department chairs/heads pertains to the conflict between teaching and research. Many faculty place a priority on research over teaching, sending not-so-subtle messages to GTAs that their training in the former is far more important than than the latter. Similarly

(or maybe as a result), many graduate students downplay their role as teachers in favor of their role as researchers.

To understand how short we are of meeting GTA needs, we need to consider what they and their supervisors perceive to be essential for effective GTA training. These concerns underlie the next model to be presented: the "necessary" GTA training model.

## THE "NECESSARY" MODEL

The GTAs themselves tell us they need training. Diamond and Gray's national study (1987a, 1987b) reveal that the GTAs requested more help than they actually received in the areas of self-evaluation, course evaluation, instructional technology, and lecturing. These findings were further supported by the data collected for this research. Trained GTAs were asked to assess their satisfaction with the following: length and time frame of training, difficulty level, practice time, time to absorb the material, GTA interaction , materials provided, and topics covered. GTAs generally were satisfied with the materials provided, the topics covered, and the length and time frame of the training sessions. They wanted the material to be presented at a higher level, more time given for practice of teaching skills, and more interaction.

The GTAs in our study indicated that 24 of the 27 possible topics listed on the questionnaire were important for their training, thus demonstrating a strong appreciation for the diversity of skills and content needed for effective teaching. GTAs indicated even stronger support for the value of those topics in ongoing training programs throughout the GTAs' teaching assignments.

When asked to assess the value of various activities that could be used to provide training (e.g., classroom observations, staff meetings, peer observations), the GTAs in the sample once again perceived a broad range of activities to be important. All nine items on the questionnaire were rated

above the midpoint of the scale on importance. Likewise, 12 of the 14 potential topics of discussion in a GTA seminar/course/workshop (e.g., establishing authority, handling cheating or plagiarism) and 9 of 12 teaching enrichment techniques (e.g., observing other faculty members as they teach, being videotaped for self-analysis, reading articles on teaching improvement techniques) received importance ratings above the midpoint of the scale.

Overall, the data collected suggest that GTAs perceived many topics, skills, and strategies to be important areas for study and appreciated an opportunity to learn more about them as they relate to teaching. Rather than seeing teacher training as extraneous, the experienced GTAs perceived high value in nearly all activities related to this training, including outside reading and assignments. However, despite the relatively positive ratings of many aspects of their training, overall satisfaction with training showed a mean of only 5.9 (on a 9-point scale). This finding indicates that there still is room for improvement.

Deans and chairs/heads expressed preferences similar to those of the GTAs for a range of training content areas, although there was much less consistency with regard to which topics were considered important. Of 17 possible topic areas listed on the questionnaire, only three (teaching strategies, grading, and providing constructive criticism) received support from 50% or more of the graduate deans as being desirable for GTA training. Similar lack of agreement was evident in the chairs/heads sample, with half of this sample agreeing on the importance of only one activity: grading/critiquing students. With regard to activities that might be used to train, deans at schools were campus-wide training was not available tended to value faculty critiques of GTA teaching, videotaped microteaching and other forms of microteaching. Only 56% of the deans at institutions where campus-wide training was available indicated offering critiqued assignments and only 11% indicated that microteach-

ing was a part of training. Fewer than 25% of the chairs/heads in departments that offered training indicated that experiential activities other than critiqued assignments were available to GTAs, although most agreed that those experiences are valuable. Thus, deans and chairs/heads also indicated desirable activities that were left out of their training programs.

Clearly, the "necessary" model is bigger than the "real" model, because GTAs seem to need more training and supervision than they are receiving. According to the data from our surveys, GTAs perceive themselves to need the following: 1) theoretical information about teaching; 2) information about teaching strategies, preparation, evaluation, classroom management, student-teacher relationships, motivation, mechanics of teaching, creating worthwhile activities, processing, and time management; 3) information about methods for teaching the specific course(s) assigned (e.g., grading specific assignments, running and processing specific activities, teaching specific course content); and 4) information about support services. This training should include many opportunities for application, both written and oral. In addition, GTAs need supervision, which should include classroom observations and follow-up critiques by a support person whose job it is to troubleshoot for them and handle problems that arise. Obviously, given this long list of needs, the time frame for accomplishing the goals associated with this "necessary" model must be longer than give days before classes.

In short, the data suggest that the state-of-the-art of GTA training does not fully address the concerns of any of the groups surveyed: deans, department chairs/heads, experienced GTAs or incoming GTAs, as evidenced by the number of "needs" that remain largely unaddressed. Nor is there clear agreement among the groups surveyed about what an "ideal" model might be. The following section attempts to incorporate those data into an "ideal" model that could be a starting point for institutions interested in comprehensive GTA training.

This model is based both on the data reported and on our own experiences with GTA training.

## THE "IDEAL" MODEL

We recognize that there can be no one model that would meet the varying needs of everyone concerned or the resources available at individual institutions for training. A small school with only 20 GTAs would not have the same needs as a large university with thousands of GTAs. However, the ideas posited here reflect a research-based approach to GTA training that may provide a model for an institution that relies heavily on GTA teaching and that may be adapted by schools that rely less heavily on GTAs. The proposed model is based on the review of literature leading up to our national study (1990), the results of the national study, and numerous convention programs, conferences and discussions with other educators involved with GTA training. While we do not pretend that ours is the only (or even the best) model, we do believe that the process of upgrading GTA training needs to start somewhere and soon. Table 1 summarizes the key components of the proposed Bilevel GTA Training Model.

### *Type of Training and Supervision (Department-Based or Campus-Wide)*

We propose a combination training model, which would provide benefits for both the GTAs and the institutions. At the campus level, GTAs would have the opportunity to interact with GTAs from other disciplines and to begin to see the "big picture" of teaching. This interaction has proved beneficial at other institutions using a combined model (Civikly, 1990). At the departmental level, GTAs would receive training tailored specifically to their needs, which would prepare them to teach a specific course. In this combination model, two key educator roles would be utilized: campus specialists and departmental

trainers, who also might be course directors (CDs). Where there is both a trainer and a CD, both people would attend campus-wide sessions.

The first phase of the model consists of campus-wide training. This training would have three major goals: l) to present teaching concepts/strategies/skills to all GTAs at the university; 2) to present those topics by specialists who are experts in the areas selected, as well as role models for quality teaching; and 3) to allow for indisciplinary exchange of ideas and information and for cross-campus interaction and support among GTAs.

In the campus-wide section of the training, educators specializing in various aspects of teaching/learning/university needs would present their areas of expertise: education professors for lesson planning, classroom management, and grading; educational psychology professors for learning theory and learning styles; speech communication professors for building rapport, presentation skills, and handling conflict; and so on. Likewise, other academic professionals could cover topics associated with their areas of expertise: school counselors could talk about test anxiety, dealing with distressed students, and recognizing substance abusers; tutors from the academic assistance program could describe services available to students; and so on. These campus specialists also would be chosen for their ability to model quality teaching practices.

**Table 1**
**A Comprehensive Combination Model for GTA Training**

| | PREPARATION | TRAINING | TRAINERS | ONGOING TRAINING AND SUPERVISION |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| UNIVERSITY-WIDE | Coordinator oversees planning<br>Tasks associated with this role:<br>recruiting specialists<br>developing objectives<br>developing materials<br>reserving space; scheduling<br>locating funding<br>coordinating planning with trainers from departments<br>contacting GTAs<br>planning evaluation/follow-up | 2 weeks prior to classes<br>lasts 5 days<br>mass-lecture format<br>presentations by specialists<br>attended by all new GTAs, some returning GTAs, all departmental training personnel<br>goals:<br>1) to present university teaching concepts, etc.<br>2) to present these topics by specialists<br>topics:<br>1) general education<br>2) preparation techniques<br>3) teaching strategies<br>4) grading/critiquing<br>5) time management<br>6) classroom presentation<br>7) classroom management<br>8) university issues | specialists in areas of teaching/learning<br>ability to model quality teaching<br>have conducted research in areas related to teaching<br>receive some sort of monetary compensation for training role | 2 meetings during each term<br>staff available to run in-service workshops, help-groups, etc.<br>staff available to videotape classes<br>resources available:<br>lending library full of training materials<br>videotapes for self-improvement<br>instructional materials center available to create course materials<br>consultants |
| INTER-DEPARTMENTAL | The University-Wide Coordinator meets with departmental trainers and course directors to coordinate activities, schedule, identify commonalities, etc. | Some form of evaluation takes place so that departmental trainers have information about what GTAs have learned and what problem areas are evident.<br>This assessment serves as a form of evaluation for the university-wide program. | University-wide specialists meet informally with departmental trainers to share ideas, concerns, etc. and to build relationships | Departmental trainers meet with University personnel to familiarize themselves with resources available on campus for new teachers. Whenever feasible departmental trainers use campus materials in weekly training meetings. |

| DESIGN | Departmental trainers oversee planning<br>Tasks associated with this role:<br>developing objectives<br>locating/developing materials<br>reserving space, scheduling<br>locating funding<br>developing activities<br>creating a course syllabus<br>coordinating input from other departmental faculty<br>planning evaluation/ follow-up | 1-2 weeks prior to classes<br>lasts 5 days<br>small group tutorial format; focus on application<br>run by trainers and/or basic course directors<br>attended by all new GTAs, some returning GTAs, some faculty<br>goals:<br>1) to supplement university-wide sessions<br>2) to deal with issues specific to this dept.<br>3) to allow time for practice/application<br>4) to build strong relationships between GTAs and departmental staff<br>topics:<br>1) specific content for each field<br>2) assignments/policies specific to courses<br>3) specific methods for course content<br>4) strategies/requirements for grading<br>5) methods for collecting feedback<br>6) ways to create excitement for specific course | experts in content they supervise<br>ability to model quality teaching<br>have conducted research in areas related to teaching<br>have commitment to quality teaching; willing to learn about communica-tion education if this is not their speciality area<br>receive load reduction or compensation for training role (and supervision) | weekly/biweekly meetings<br>regular class observations and follow-up critiques<br>peer observations/peer teaching<br>mentoring system with experienced GTAs and/or faculty members<br>incentives for teaching success (e.g., being "promoted" to more difficult teaching assignments)<br>periodic course evaluations<br>availability of trainer/bcd to answer questions, troubleshoot, provide suggestions, etc. |
|---|---|---|---|---|

The topics covered in the campus-wide training would be selected for their generalizability to all GTAs at the institution. Certainly it is difficult for departmental trainers to be current with all of the latest innovations in learning theory, teaching strategies, etc. Identifying people at each institution who specialize in specific areas would allow the GTAs to receive training from the very best faculty the campus has to offer. Similarly, the campus-wide program could be used to tackle issues related to significant subgroups within the GTA population. For example, specialists in training international teaching assistants (ITAs) could work with those GTAs to handle cultural difficulties, language barriers, and other issues related to teaching a course in a second language in a foreign country. Likewise, GTAs could be formed into subgroups for certain types of generalized instruction: how to handle a mass lecture, how to run lab sections of a course, how to work within self-paced programs, and so on.

Largely for cost and logistical reasons, we propose that sessions be conducted in a mass-lecture format. These campus professionals would deliver their messages with little interaction or discussion (as long as time was provided later in the training for such interaction/discussion to occur). This format would provide a cost-effective way to learn from a school's experts in an area of teaching. Videotaped lessons might be developed to use in the future in place of some of these professionals.

The departmental trainers should attend these sessions for many reasons. First, they would have to be part of this training process so that departmental training builds on this experience rather than repeating or contradicting these sessions. In addition, areas that may have been unclear or not fully developed could be returned to in departmental sessions. Second, departmental trainers may get new ideas from these experts. After all, many of these trainers would not have a strong background in education. Many departmental trainers would benefit from having the pressure lifted to be the sole

authority on teaching that his/her GTAs look to for skills and guidance. If the training is not handled by the course director, that person should attend these sessions, too. Such attendance would foster a sense of unity among the various components of the GTA training/supervision program. Third, attendance at these sessions would allow departmental trainers and course directors (CDs) to exchange ideas among professionals with whom they share similar duties and concerns. GTA trainers often become isolated within their departments because there usually is only one person per department assigned to this task and, according to our research, even remotely interested in this task in many cases! Therefore, getting feedback for improvement and incorporating new ideas into training is difficult because there is no outlet for obtaining those new ideas.

Ideally, the campus specialists and departmental trainers would have time to spend together before the sessions to share concerns, learn what is about to occur, etc. Departmental trainers could receive some support for and instruction in their roles at this time. This interaction would promote unity between the campus-wide and the departmental sessions and would allow for the exchange of ideas, successes and failures. It also would allow for some trainers to excuse their students from a campus-wide training session or provide an alternative activity for their GTAs if they perceived a specific session to be inappropriate for that group. For example, a session on grading might be considered a waste of time for students who will run labs only. We would caution against this practice, however, especially if used often. If one of our concerns is preparing the professoriate of tomorrow, then skill-building now may have a future payoff even if the immediate application is not apparent. Also, teaching assignments for GTAs may change from year to year as a GTA gains experience. A first year assignment may be to serve as a lab assistant; a third year assignment may require

preparing an entire course. Thus, a short-sighted approach to this training may defeat long-term goals.

Further, the teaching specialists could remain as consultants for the departmental trainers throughout the year. Periodically, mass sessions could be held to reinforce and clarify skills and strategies dealt with in the campus-wide training session. In addition, this approach would allow the institution's GTAs and departmental trainers to continue to interact, thus fostering a continuous sharing among these educators and GTAs.

Following or concurrent with this campus-wide training would be departmental training. This departmental training would have four goals: l) to supplement learning from the campus-wide sessions, 2) to deal with issues specifically relevant to the GTAs' teaching area(s), 3) to allow time for practice and application of skills, and 4) to build a strong relationship between the GTAs and the departmental training personnel.

First, concepts introduced in the campus-wide training would be discussed and applied. The smaller departmental groups would allow for questions and clarifications of the ideas presented. Then, these ideas would be applied to the specific discipline. For example, in communication, the principles of lecturing and processing exercises would be applied to topics in speech communication (e.g., leadership, listening, conflict) and actual exercises likely to be done in a speech communication classroom.

Second, specific issues relevant to each field/course would be introduced, discussed and practiced in the departmental training. In communication, specific ideas and skills such as coaching, critiquing and grading speeches/performances may be undertaken. Further, specific assignments, course policies, and so on would be discussed.

A third goal of the departmental training would be personal skill development. The GTAs would lead exercises, give lectures, practice critiquing speeches, process activities,

and so on. Videotaping of some or all of these practice activities would allow GTAs to engage in self and peer critique and to discuss their strengths and weaknesses with the departmental trainer.

The final goal of the departmental training would be to develop a spirit of trust and camaraderie among the GTAs, the trainer and other faculty. Professional standards for teaching well may be ingrained at this crucial point in their budding professional careers. The message sent should be a strong one: Teaching is important; without providing quality teaching to our students, we are taking money from them fraudulently and we should be held responsible as any fraudulent person should be; without quality teaching, solid research becomes an isolated activity rather than a complementary activity to teaching; and a serious approach to teaching is not only expected by this department, but nothing else will be tolerated. The modeling of the trainer, course director, faculty members and even experienced GTAs can be invaluable in reaching this goal. Including other faculty and GTAs in the training by inviting them to a retreat, inviting them to stop by to greet the GTAs on breaks during training, providing time for faculty to give short presentations about their philosophy of teaching, and allowing informal opportunities for GTAs and faculty to interact (e.g. a barbecue supper after a training session) can be used to create relationships among GTAs and between the new GTAs and the veteran staff.

Since the goals for the departmental training are complex, a course might be developed through which the GTAs receive credit toward their degrees. Creation of such a course might motivate the GTAs because a level of importance is added once a grade toward a final GPA is associated with their teaching duties. A graded course also may give the trainer more license to expect written lesson plans, observation papers, research into teaching strategies, etc. Additionally, this course would become a certain number of credits of the

GTA's first term. Since most GTAs have a certain minimum expectation for a load of coursework, without receiving course credit for this training, an additional course may have to be taken, which would further compete for the GTA's time. One final advantage of GTAs taking a course in teaching in their field is the legitimacy this course may add to the teaching assignment. Communication education often is viewed as less rigorous a research area and professionals are given less respect than their interpersonal, small group, communication theory, organizational, and rhetorical counterparts. Surely such attitudes do nothing to elevate the level of teaching in our profession.

## *Participants*

The "ideal" training model is designed for all teaching assistants prior to and/or during their first term of teaching. Even if a person has taught before taking this assistantship, participating in the training would ensure a commonality of understanding/experiences among the GTAs in a department and between the GTA and the supervisor.

It is important to note here that while this training is designed for GTAs at the beginning of an assistantship, returning GTAs also may benefit from joining the training group. New skills may be needed by GTAs as they receive different teaching assignments from a department. Training that a GTA was excused from or training taken when the teaching assignment was very different may need to be taken in the future. Likewise, asking returning GTAs to take part in the training as peer teachers, group facilitators, or mentors allows those GTAs both to gain new skills and to take on additional teaching/training responsibilities as their skills allow. Certainly, one training session will not create master teachers; additional opportunities for the returning staff to work with the new staff can only add to the skills the returning GTAs take to their classrooms. Such interaction also

builds relationships across the groups, providing support for new GTAs and reinforcement for the returning staff.

## *Time Frame of Training/Supervision*

We propose that training should start in late summer, at least two weeks before regular classes begin. The campus-wide training should begin first and last for five full days. This session would be followed by five full days of departmental training. Further, we propose that considerable time be devoted to training throughout the first term of teaching. Departmental trainers and basic course directors should meet with university specialists at least twice during this time: at a midpoint to provide feedback to each other and to discuss needed areas of further information/discussion and again at the end to share successes and failures and to plan for the future. At the institutional level, at least two mass meetings should be held where all of the GTAs, departmental trainers and course directors, and campus specialists congregate to share examples, ask questions, propose additional solutions, etc.

At the departmental level, regular meetings should be held (each week or biweekly) by the departmental trainer and/or CD. These meetings could involve general sharing sessions, further skill development, introduction or clarification of upcoming assignments, or even guest speakers in a general teaching area or a specific discipline-related content area. For departments in which GTAs teach a wide array of materials and grade/critique a large number of assignments, regular meetings would allow the trainer(s) to provide information and practice as needed. Certainly, learning how to grade a 5-minute speech 2 weeks before the assignment is due will result in better retention of the information than learning how to perform the same task in a session 12 weeks earlier! Likewise, practice grading sessions, writing processing questions for specific activities, or learning how to use a videotape

to teach a specific content area all might be better timed to fit the schedule of the course the GTAs teach.

These meetings also may be a good time for other faculty and/or experienced GTAs in the department to share their teaching ideas. This format would allow the GTAs to meet others, learn new ideas and even have their commitment to teaching reinforced through the example set by teachers other than the trainer and/or basic course director. Experienced GTAs could present a topic of mutual interest to the group (e.g., the pros and cons of using various types of critique sheets). Again, the concept of peer teaching/tutoring/ mentoring could continue in this meeting format. These meetings also may be a place and time to evaluate assignments and the program overall. In addition. some GTA incentives for quality teaching may be developed (e.g., Teacher of the Month, recognition of contribution to the teaching program) and may be presented during such meetings.

The ongoing departmental training also should include direct supervision of the GTAs in their classrooms. At least once during the first term of teaching, the trainer should observe the GTA teach, and the trainer and the GTA should meet to discuss the observation. A lesson plan might be given to the trainer ahead of time to help distinguish between planning problems and presentation problems. Some of the assignments in the GTA training course might center around this observation. The lesson plan just referred to and a self-critique paper analyzing strengths and weaknesses and proposing ways to improve might be useful to the GTA. If unacceptable weaknesses are seen in the observation, a second observation can be scheduled. In between, some remediation should be proposed (e.g., private meetings, sitting in on another GTA's or professor's class, reviewing teaching tapes, consulting with a specialist, etc.). This pattern of observation should be repeated every term to help the GTAs continue to improve. (Later, GTAs may be asked to team-teach with experienced faculty members who would assume

responsibility for providing feedback and offering improvement suggestions. Only the strongest teachers on the faculty would make good choices for team teaching with GTAs.)

We also believe that peer teaching/learning is a beneficial concept to integrate into the departmental training. GTAs should be put in pairs (or teams), which would provide a ready-made person with whom to share ideas. Certainly GTAs will build their own support groups which may or may not include this teammate. However, pairing people up provides an immediate support person who may be needed in the critical first few days of teaching. We also advocate that each new GTA observe at least two peers. This opportunity allows for direct sharing of ideas and, once again, may foster an atmosphere of mutual support desired among the GTAs. It also may be beneficial to have GTAs observe experienced teachers. A cooperative departmental atmosphere and accent on quality teaching may evolve from such interactions, and knowing that they serve as role models may enhance faculty teaching as well!

## *Topics To Be Dealt With In Training/Supervision*

Although each institution might have different ways of organizing and/or structuring training sessions, certain topics would need to be covered for the training to be effective. The list in Table 2 provides an overview of the breadth of topics to be included in the training program, both at the campus and departmental levels.

**Table 2**
**Training Topics**

**Campus-Wide.**

1) general education — learning theory, learning styles, motivating students, creating interest in course content, philosophy of education, etc.;
2) preparation techniques — course planning/preparation, lesson-planning, setting goals/stating objectives, analyzing students;
3) teaching strategies — lecturing, leading and processing activities, leading discussions, providing hands-on experience, using groups, using technology, others (role-plays, case studies, etc.);
4) grading/critiquing (setting due dates, establishing criteria, being consistent, providing constructive feedback, making expectations clear to students, etc.);
5) time management;
6) classroom presentation (animation, vocal variety, eye contact, etc.);
7) classroom management — organization, interpersonal climate, discipline, conflict, use of nonverbal elements (seating, lighting, pacing, etc.); and
8) university issues — rules/regulations for GTAs; resources available; expectations for the GTA role university-wide.

**Department Based.**

1) specific content for each field (including some form of testing to ascertain the level at which GTAs understand the content that they are expected to teach);
2) assignments/policies specific to the course(s) to be taught (including a sample syllabus and daily schedule for standardized courses);

3) specific methods for teaching course content (lecture content, activities, videotapes, other materials; some form of GTA handbook might be provided to supply specific information);
4) strategies/requirements for grading specific assignments (including specific critique sheets and criteria used for standardized courses);
5) methods for soliciting and interpreting student feedback; and
6) ways to create excitement for specific course content.

## *Campus Specialists/Departmental Trainers*

It should be clear that the campus specialists and departmental trainers should be selected with care. The specialists will be charged with providing the teaching techniques and classroom management ideas for all GTAs at the college/university. A poor presentation here could result in poor teaching in disciplines throughout the institution! The campus specialists must be experts in their areas, both in their knowledge and in their teaching skills. Certainly selecting specialists based on their research expertise would enhance their credibility and further reinforce the dove-tailing of research and teaching.

The departmental trainers should have similar qualifications. They should be selected because they are experts in the general content of the field they supervise and, ideally, should have training in education. Additionally, trainers must be solid teacher role-models.

An absolute requirement for both the specialists and the trainers is that they be committed to quality teaching and willing to familiarize themselves with the most recent literature in education. In addition, the specialists and the trainers

must be willing to provide the time needed to guide inexperienced GTAs through the trials of teaching, which is a time-consuming process. The GTAs need to be able to state their feelings of frustration, seek advice about handling a student problem, and just generally share details of the challenge of teaching (failures and successes!). Lastly, these people must be willing and able to handle the details of scheduling, planning and evaluation of the entire program. A Campus Training Coordinator (or committee) could handle administration of the campus-wide programs and act as an advisor for the departmental trainers. Regardless of who takes on the role, coordinated effort among the units of the institution would seem to be an essential predictor of the effectiveness of the Bilevel Model.

## THE REALITIES OF THE "IDEAL"

### *Costs*

One major cost is in faculty time. Clearly the "oh, by the way, could you train our GTAs?" method of assigning trainers and specialists to this program will not work. Such a commitment should not be on top of all of the other expectations of being a productive faculty member, at least not for very long. Course load credit should be equated with this assignment for the departmental trainers. Since the specialists may only be asked to commit a few days a year, monetary compensation may be adequate. In a large university, one coordinator of the campus-wide component may be assigned course load credit to meet with the departmental trainers, plan the sessions, gather supporting materials for further use by the GTAs, evaluate the program, etc. In many cases, the

role of the dean of the graduate school may include training supervision.

A meeting place for the campus-wide component would have to be large enough to hold all of the people involved. For some universities, this requirement will mean giving a priority to this program over late summer conferences, orientation programs, and the like.

Materials will have to be developed and copied. A mass session will be more effective if materials can be supplied to the GTAs either to be read ahead of time or to be kept as a review of what was covered. Similarly, such printed materials may substitute for training sessions, if the content can be learned by the GTA independently. A Materials Center could be established which would provide a specified place where materials could be checked out, GTAs from across the university could meet to share ideas and resources, etc. Once again, course load credit may have to be devoted to someone to develop such resources. The major development costs should be a one-time only cost, however. Updating the materials might be done as a part of each specialist's job and could be computed as part of that compensation or could be part of a program coordinator's job. Copying costs could be provided from the general fund, each department could provide copies of the materials for its GTAs, or the materials could be sold through the campus press or a copying outlet.

While the total cost of such a program could be significant, depending on the facilities and resources already in place, creative solutions can be found. First of all, it would be feasible to put the model into place in phases, possibly over the course of several years. Second, the prospect of personal development/support and interdisciplinary research opportunities may motivate personnel to volunteer their time, at least initially. Finally, fund-raising efforts aimed at securing support from state/local foundations, businesses, alumni, and national agencies (e.g., Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education) could be initiated.

## *Commitment*

Far above monetary considerations, the proposed "ideal" model for GTA training will take commitment, but we see many benefits to the institution. The cooperation it will take among departments should help to break down some of the often-territorial behaviors among units of a campus. The new possibilities for research in teaching and training from an interdisciplinary standpoint, as well as other possible areas of mutual interest that may arise once professionals spend time together, should make this training model appealing even to the most research-oriented university. The potential to help train the professors of tomorrow should be a goal of every institution interested in the betterment of education as a whole. Whether or not these benefits are seen as important should not undermine one of the most compelling reasons why an institution should commit to this (or some other equally comprehensive) training model: Students deserve quality teaching, whether it be from tenured, full professors or first-term GTAs.

Departments also will need to be committed to such a project. Often, departments have the power to allocate course load time to the trainer without input from outside. Departmental commitment may be shown through a mandate to their graduate students: GTAs can only begin teaching after they have successfully completed the required training. Developing a comprehensive training program is useless if several GTAs are not required to be a part of that training session. Such a commitment can be painful. It may mean telling desirable students to wait a term before being eligible for teaching assistantships. It also may mean leaving a vacancy unfilled if no qualified GTAs are available to fill the slot. If the teaching assistantships are viewed as a means to an end (i.e., a way of financing graduate studies or an economical way to generate student credit hours), then this decision will be very difficult. If, on the other hand, the

department feels the teaching assistantship brings with it a responsibility to students to offer them the best possible instruction, then turning away desirable GTAs who would not be well trained as teachers will be an easy task. Such commitment is vital for any training program to work.

Another form of commitment is needed: Departments need to support the trainer in his or her goals. First of all, departments should choose a respected and productive faculty member to serve in this capacity so the GTAs have a positive role model. Faculty should be willing to be guest speakers, let students observe classes, support the trainer's requests for materials, etc. Perhaps most importantly, the trainer should have the respect of the faculty. Other faculty can undermine the best trainer's efforts. Telling advisees (or showing them through behaviors) that teaching really is not important; that students, not the teachers, have the majority of the responsibility in the learning situation; that "I was never trained and look how good a teacher I am;" that student papers can wait a month to be graded; and that research in education is "only done as a last resort;" can undermine the training process. Furthermore, such innuendoes make the trainer appear unreasonable for expecting GTAs to sit in on classes, attend staff meetings, write self-evaluation papers, read books on the subject of teaching, watch videotapes, and perform a variety of other time-consuming tasks. Such departmental commitment probably begins with the department chairperson, who is in a position both to authorize use of resources and to persuade faculty to see the benefits of training.

## CONCLUSION

To date, many institutions have expressed interest in GTA training but have hesitated to make the substantial commitment of money, time, and personnel to this effort because of a lack of data which could substantiate the claim that GTA training is both necessary and beneficial. The data

compiled here should help administrators begin to make the case for that commitment.

We have attempted to prescribe the medicine that will help to cure the ills associated with poor college-level teaching. We recognize that, just as the ills differ by institution and department, so the cure must be modified to meet the unique needs of those who must use it. Consequently, we offer a starting point from which higher education professionals may begin to improve the quality of GTA teaching (and, ultimately, college-level teaching in general). At present, communication departments seem to be leading the way with regard to GTA training. We hope to see that trend continue.

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